DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 412 JC 920 047

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TITLE The Community College and Vocational Education: Issues of Access and Retention.
INSTITUTION Fashion Inst. of Tech., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE 14 Nov 91
NOTE 13p.; Testimony presented before the New York State Assembly Committee on Higher Education Public Hearing (Albany, NY, November 14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; *Access to Education; Cognitive Style; College Curriculum; College Role; Community Colleges; General Education; Nontraditional Education; *School Holding Power; *Student Attrition; Student Costs; Technical Institutes; Trade and Industrial Education; Two Year Colleges; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS *Fashion Institute of Technology NY

ABSTRACT

The Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York has one of the highest student retention rates of any community college in the country, graduating more than 62% of those enrolled. Nationwide, community college retention rates average 35%, and at some colleges, attrition is as high as 70%. While community colleges provide access to education for an increasingly diverse group of students, access on its own means little if students are not retained until they achieve their educational goals. From FIT's perspective, the secret to retention is the provision of vocational and technical education from the student's first day on campus. FIT students begin by studying their chosen specialty and ultimately progress to more general courses after their first 2 years, in contrast to the traditional view of education which regards proper learning as progressing from the general to the specific. At FIT, vocational education is the tool for teaching reading, mathematics, science, ethics, critical thinking, management, and other subjects. Vocational education allows the school to adapt to the learning styles of those who have not succeeded in traditional verbal-style learning. The myth that general education is more valuable than vocational and technical education limits access to those with different learning styles. The results at FIT have been positive; 90% of the graduates available for employment are working full time. The high retention rate at FIT is a result not of being a specialized college, but from providing a vocational/technical education from the start of a student's career. (JMC)

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Testimony before the
New York State Assembly Committee on Higher Education
Public Hearing

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JC 920047

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The Community College and Vocational Education: Issues of Access and Retention

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Marvin Feldman, and I am president of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, and have been for the past 20 years. I've been invited to testify, in part, because these days we at F.I.T. seem to be regarded as experts on student retention. We have acquired that reputation by virtue of recent statistics which show that F.I.T.'s student retention rate is one of the best for a community college. F.I.T.'s two-year A.A.S. degree programs graduate more than 62 percent of those enrolled, while the average for community colleges in general is only about 35 percent. That's quite a gap.

So I think what I am expected to do here is boast about F.I.T.'s numbers, reveal the secrets of our success and offer up the college as a model for other community colleges to emulate.

I will in fact do a little of that, because I think there is something to be learned from F.I.T.'s brand of education that might be useful to legislators and educators interested in improving student retention.

Of course, I'm pleased that my institution's retention rate is among the best; I guess it means we must be doing

something right. But I want to say at once that a 62 percent retention rate does not make me proud. At F.I.T., we think it's not nearly good enough. We want to reach 90 percent or higher. In fact, for most of the past 20 years, retention was closer to 70 percent.

I'm absolutely dismayed that 62 percent is the best our community colleges can do -- and most can't come anywhere near even that modest standard. It seems to me we must be doing something terribly wrong. I don't think a 60 percent retention rate -- especially when you think of it as a 40 percent attrition rate -- is much to boast about. Of course, community colleges have an incredibly difficult mission. Sometimes the problems seem overwhelming. But when attrition reaches 60 and 70 percent as it does in more than a few community colleges, we have to do more than just wonder why. In fact, I am told that attrition in all colleges in America averages over 60 percent.

We simply cannot afford to lose so many students. Our economy cannot afford it, nor can our individual industries. Our state, our cities, our communities cannot afford it. This is not news to anyone here.

We know all about the need for a productive, well-educated, globally competitive American work force. And we know that our educational system must play an important role in making sure that need is met.

So we talk a great deal about access to education, and truly we have gone a long way toward making our public colleges, especially community colleges, accessible to students of every stripe. We're doing more outreach, implementing more articulation agreements. We see increasing diversity on many campuses. Our students are traditional and non-traditional, new immigrants, minorities, displaced workers, disadvantaged, returning, retired, young, old and middle-aged. And that's a good start.

But here I must stop for a moment to emphasize an obvious but essential point. It's important that we discuss access and retention, and I'm pleased to have been asked to do so. However, all of our talk means nothing if tuition keeps going up and we find ourselves pricing the average learner right out of our classrooms. As aware as we are of the children of poverty, and as sensitive as we try to be to their educational needs, the working poor will be locked out. It's already beginning to happen. Without access, the community college mission is meaningless. We must keep tuition low to keep education accessible to all.

The question of access leads directly to another question: what is the point of access without retention? It's like inviting a hungry guest home for Thanksgiving, tempting him with a whiff of the turkey, and then showing him the door before the bird is even carved. Well, our students deserve to participate in the entire feast, every dish from

the chestnut dressing to the pumpkin pie. They need educational nourishment badly, and we have to make sure they don't leave us before they get it.

Clearly, community colleges have not been giving sufficient numbers of students enough of a taste for learning to entice them to stick around for the next course. But these colleges can do it, despite the tough problems we face on our campuses -- even for students who have not previously been successful in school.

The secret, and it is a well-kept secret in some educational circles, is vocational and technical education, delivered to students right up front from the first day they arrive on campus. That is what's special about F.I.T.'s approach to education. Not that F.I.T. could be accurately described as strictly a vocational college, but we do specialize in preparing people for work, and we do have a vocational focus that enhances learning for many students at the college. That is what's special about our associate level programs. And that, I believe, is responsible at least in part for our relatively high retention rate compared to that of other community colleges.

Of course, F.I.T. is not an ordinary community college. We offer baccalaureate and even master's degree programs. But the A.A.S. remains at the heart of our educational mission. Every student must earn an associate degree before enrolling in a baccalaureate program. Our students earn a

two-year degree in a specialized field, and then choose whether to go to work or on to two more years of study leading to the baccalaureate. If they choose further study, they spend the next two years advancing their knowledge of their specialty and broadening the scope of their general knowledge.

Now, the traditional view of education is that learning properly begins with the general and progresses to the specific, the way it does in most four-year institutions. But at F.I.T., it's the opposite. Students begin by studying their chosen specialty -- the very reason they came to F.I.T. in the first place. They plunge right in, and their enthusiasm for their major courses is a strong motivator for keeping them in school. And we've seen that they can progress quite comfortably from the specifics they learn in their first two years to the more general content of their later courses. Indeed, for some students, this is the best way to learn.

These days, we often hear from education experts that what most students need in order to prepare for a rapidly and constantly changing economic and technological environment is more and more general education, and less and less specific, job-related education. I know the arguments: when today's students enter the workplace, they will have to know how to deal with increasingly sophisticated technology; their jobs will require flexibility, analytical ability, and problem

solving, not just the mere repetition of simple tasks; they will probably have to retrain several times during their working lives. They will have to be adaptable, skilled in mathematics and computer technology, literate -- in short, well educated.

Now, to many educators, this means more general education, more liberal arts, and less vocational education; they think anything that might be considered specific training for a particular job will soon be obsolete anyway, because the work place is changing so fast. Education with a vocational focus is seen as just too narrow. Students with this kind of education presumably won't be able to cope with change or the demands of an increasingly complex society.

I think this is nonsense. It's true that many students, especially those who are highly verbal, do perfectly well with a liberal arts education. But it's equally true that many students do not -- at least the way they are generally taught in our educational system. This means we've got to come up with alternatives -- excellent, effective, educationally sound alternatives -- for those students.

We know that people have many different learning styles. Verbal is just one of them, though it's usually the most highly rewarded in our society. Some students are graphic learners. Others learn best through manipulation. Still

others are affective. And powerful educational experiences can result when students' learning styles are matched with appropriate teaching procedures.

Vocational education gives students who may not have succeeded in traditional verbal-style learning situations a chance to learn in a way that is compatible with their own style. It's amazing to watch certain students who have been bored or frustrated or totally alienated in school begin to develop self-esteem as soon as they're given something to do with their hands, something to build, a design problem to solve, a mechanical process to understand. And when they succeed in that, and take pride in it, and their teachers and fellow students value it too, education takes on a new meaning. Suddenly, learning is associated with accomplishment, not failure. With pride, not shame. And students want to experience that satisfaction again and again. They've learned they can learn, and they like it.

And the interesting thing is, we're not only teaching them job skills and helping them develop self-esteem, we're able to use the vocational processes as a tool for teaching reading, mathematics, science, ethics, critical thinking, management, anything you wish. In short, we can use vocational and technical education to further the larger goals that educators have in mind.

Moreover, as far as I know, no one has ever proved that learning a special skill makes a person less likely to be

able to learn another, that it makes a person less flexible or less adaptable to change. I don't know whether anyone has even considered the possibility that mastering one special skill actually enhances a person's ability to learn another and yet another as needed. I do know that forcing certain students into classes whose relevance to their lives escapes them, and teaching them in a style that's as foreign to them as ancient Greek is not the way to keep them in school.

In any case, I think there is danger in perpetuating the myths about vocational and technical education. If we merely accept the conventional wisdom that values general education more than vocational education, we're denying ourselves a powerful tool for positive change. We need to end the tug-of-war between general and vocational education if we want to reach out to the maximum number of students.

What F.I.T. does is prepare students for work -- for careers that we know to exist in every aspect of the fashion and related industries. Our placement statistics show that we are doing this quite well. Forty-three percent of our 1990 graduates are employed full time, and 6 percent are doing free-lance or part-time work. Of the 47 percent who are unavailable for work, 36 percent are continuing their education. According to figures from our Placement Office, 90 percent of the graduates available for employment are working full-time. What doesn't show up in these statistics is the number of alumni who are working in their own

businesses. But we know from our continuing contacts with our graduates, and from monitoring the media coverage of our industries, that the numbers are considerable. And we consider education for entrepreneurship to be a significant aspect of our mission, as well as a healthy development for our city and state.

What many people don't realize when they hear "Fashion Institute of Technology" is that we define fashion in the broadest sense. We go well beyond the apparel and textile industries, into every area that touches on any aspect of fashion. Thus, we have programs in interior design, advertising design, communications, fashion management, marketing, toy design, even museum studies and restoration. And we provide an ever-renewing reservoir of human resources for all those industries, and more. We have close ties to our industries, too, which enables us to be responsive to their needs, and call on them for participation and support. These connections help keep our programs vital, and this real-world orientation also helps keep students motivated.

Fashion is famous for trends and change. We are always confronting the future head-on. Thus, educating for the fashion industries is a great challenge. What the industries need tomorrow, educators must be producing today. Of course, this is true not just in fashion, but in almost every field one can name. The growing complexity and sophistication, globalization, and rapid, ceaseless change that we are seeing

in the fashion industries are present everywhere. And so we believe that some of what we have learned at F.I.T. is applicable to other institutions of learning, especially community colleges.

F.I.T.'s relatively high retention rate is sometimes seen as a result of our being a specialized college, but I disagree. I would argue that it's due to our providing vocational/technical education up front, and doing it well. Any college can do this, comprehensive as well as specialized.

All we need to do is recognize that vocational and liberal arts education are not mutually exclusive; they can complement and enhance each other. Our culture exists in the things we make, and not apart from them. Thus, the values and principles we teach in the liberal arts find expression in the processes and products of vocational/technical education. At F.I.T., we are comfortable with this notion. In fact, the college has been built on it.

But in the 30 or more years I've spent in education, I've seen that most policy makers, educational planners and elected officials are much less comfortable with vocational education than with the liberal arts. We've got to change this. We've got to recognize that vocational education is not something we sentence a kid to when we've given up on him or her as a learner or a scholar. It's real education. It can be excellent and it can be rigorous. It can even be an

integral part of a liberal arts education. And it can motivate students to stay in school.

Community colleges have become a vital force in American education. But these institutions had a rather dubious origin. Created as a device to cool enrollment pressures on overburdened four-year colleges and universities, the community college was little more than a byproduct of the post-World War II population explosion. But community colleges have become legitimate. They have proved their worth as social and educational institutions. With about 43 percent of the nation's undergraduates and 51 percent of all first-time entering freshmen enrolled in community colleges, we have become the largest single sector of higher education in the country.

The community colleges have always been the people's colleges, the open door to opportunity for all. As the colleges of working people, the issues of access and retention are especially urgent for us now. We need to recognize that the vocational approach to education can be an excellent one for attracting and keeping students. I propose that we look at the facts, stop perpetuating the myths, and commit ourselves to a greater investment in vocational education.

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MAR 27 1992